

Negative polar questions in Igbo

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It has been observed that sentences which are both interrogatives and negatives are the ones that are the most difficult to process, analyse and interpret (Savin and Perchonock, 1965). The literature is replete with opinions that stress that polar negative questions display an ambiguity that differentiates them from positive interrogative questions (Ladd, 1981; Buring and Gunlogsen, 2000; Huddleston and Pulhem, 2002; Romaro and Han, 2004). Additionally negative interrogative questions convey a backgrounded attitude on the part of the speaker toward the proposition expressed by a positive answer (Han, 2002; Van Rooy and Safarora, 2003; Rese, 2006). Previous studies on polar questions in Igbo concentrated on the interrogatives with inadequate attention on the implications of the answer. Due to the fact that the answer provides important clue and information about the nature of the question, the present study empirically examines negative polar question in Igbo, with a view to delineate the meanings deducible from the answers. This study will examine negative polarity within the framework of semantics and pragmatics. In terms of methodology, 2 different negative interrogative questions were used as template and these questions were posed to 20 respondents who had Igbo as first language and who were vastly proficient in Igbo. Precisely, 14 of the respondents were students of linguistics and Igbo while 6 were lecturers of Igbo in the University of Lagos, Nigeria. The sample represents those who are well versed and grounded in Igbo language. The study found a variety of negative questions in Igbo and grouped them into two broad categories: Complex Biased Negative Questions (CBNQ) and Simple Biased Negative Questions (SBNQ). The CBNQ represents a unique class in Igbo due to the fact that irrespective of the answer (Yes/No) the proposition is negative. Example:

Sample Question 1

Question: O bughi Okoro nuru mmiri ahu?
It is not Okoro drink+fact water that
'Is it not Okoro that drank the water'?

Answer: 1 Ee (O bughi Okoro)
Yes (it is not Okoro)

2 Mba (O bughi okoro)
No (it is not Okoro)

In the example above, based on the stance of illocution, the speaker wants a confirmation of the negative proposition. However, a 'yes' or 'no' answer is complex; a 'yes' negates the proposition and a 'no' equally negates the proposition. A majority of the respondents 12 (60%) were of the opinion that both 'yes' and 'no' confirmed the negative proposition while a minority 6 (30%) responded that 'no' negates the negative proposition while 'yes' confirms it. The remaining 2 (10%) respondents reported that they were confused with the implication of 'yes' and 'no' to the question. Irrespective of the answer, the participants unanimously agreed that the yes/no answer is too semantically complicated and would require some qualification.

Sample question 2

Negative declarative + negative tag, example

Q Okoro ejeghi ahia, o bughi ya?
Okoro do go NOT market, it is NOT so
'Okoro did not go to market, is it not so?'

Ans: 1. Ee (o bu ya) ee (o bughi ya)
Yes (it is so) yes (it is not so)

2 Mba (o bughi ya) mba (o bu ya)
No (it is not so) no (it is so)

In the example, the speaker wants the responder to support the negative proposition with a 'no'. But the negative tag presents a little problem. A yes supports the negative proposition and also supports the negative tag. On the contrary a 'no' opposes the negative proposition and also negates the negative tag. In this example 20 (100%) of the respondents agreed to the complexity of the tag.

The Simple Biased Negative Questions (SBNQ) constitute mainly tag questions in Igbo. There are different types of the questions.

Sample question 3

Positive declarative + negative tag question - example

- Question- Okoro jere ahia, o bughi ya?
Okoro go+fact market, it is NOT so
'Okoro went to market, is it not so?'
- Ans: 1 ee (o bu ya)
Yes (it is so)
- 2 Mba (o bughi ya)
No (it is not so)

In this example, the speaker wants the respondents to support the positive proposition with a yes. The speaker believes strongly in the truth of the proposition. This is a simple negative polar question with respect to the meaning of the yes/ No answer. Its simplicity derives from the fact that the tag questions the affirmative proposition in the matrix clause. In this context, a 'yes' supports the affirmation and a 'no' opposes the positive proposition. 20 (100%) respondents agreed that ee (yes) affirms the proposition while 'mba' (no) negates the proposition.

Sample question 4

Negative declaration + positive tag question - example

- Question Okoro ejeghi ahia, o kwa ya?
Okoro did go NOT market, it is so
'Okoro did not go to market, is it so?'
- Ans 1 ee (o jeghi)
Yes (he did not go)
- 2 Mba (o jere)
No (he went)

In the example, the speaker wants the respondent to support the negative proposition with a 'yes' here, also the speaker believe in the truth of the negative proposition.

In conclusion, it is evident that negative interrogative question in Igbo, especially the Complex Biased Negative Question (CBNQ) are problematic with regards to the meaning of the answers, and the interpretation by the hearer and the speaker. This ambiguity is largely on account of the biased stance of the question and also the syntactic frame of the question. In some cases, the speaker expects a definite 'yes' or 'No' answer but the complexity requires the responder to decode the answer after a 'yes' or 'no'.

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